



COL. KATHIE CLOSE
377th Air Base Wing commander

FORUM

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Longtime volunteer dies on New Year's Eve

BY JENNIFER E. WEST

377th Air Base Wing Public Affairs

When you think of volunteerism at Kirtland AFB, the name Frances Merritt comes to mind first for most TEAM KIRTLAND members. The longtime, tirelessly dedicated volunteer with the Family Support Center died Dec. 31. She was 80. A memorial service was held Jan. 3.

"TEAM KIRTLAND and the Air Force have lost a valued member and volunteer," said Col. Kathleen Close, 377th Air Base Wing commander.

"Frances' thousands of hours of volunteerism have helped so many of our military families. She will be greatly missed by her many friends and coworkers."

At the time of her death, Merritt had accumulated 22,950 volunteer hours for TEAM KIRTLAND. In July 2000 when she was 77 years old, Merritt had accrued 20,677 of those hours by the time she was selected as the 2000 Very Important Patriot Award of Merit recipient by the National Military Family Association. That award recognizes volunteers worldwide who help improve quality of life in the military and neighboring communities. She was among five recipients of the award given to volunteers with the Air Force, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard Reserve and the Army and Air National Guard.

In a July 2000 Nucleus story on her recognition by the patriot award, Merritt vowed to continue giving her time and talents "as long as I can put one foot in front of the other."

"She worked right up to December 11 when she took sick and went into the hospital," noted retired Col. Bobby Wright, former 377th Air Base Wing vice commander and longtime friend of Merritt.

Wright called Merritt "a special friend of mine" for at least 21 years whom he has recognized for service many times. He said she

"touched the lives of many military folks," including Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines and their dependents.

Part of Merritt's many volunteer hours was spent sewing quilts for babies of younger, lower-ranking enlisted people.

Ethel Tilley of the Family Support Center called Merritt "extraordinary" and "very conscientious in details" and noted her diligence making sure customers received good quality service.

Tilley added, "She was a friend to most people" and will be in the memories of many people she served.

"The Kirtland AFB Family Support Center and TEAM KIRTLAND lost a longtime friend and volunteer," Ray Burton, Family Support Center director, said. Calling her one of the most dedicated individuals he's ever known, he said she had a heart of gold.

"Frances dedicated most of her life taking care of people and never asked for anything in return, especially making the quilts for the layette program for newborn babies," Burton added.

"She had worked as a volunteer in the Kirtland AFB Family Services Loan Locker for at least 25 years. Even though her health was failing, she would come to work every Wednesday and Friday, health permitting."

Among her numerous recognitions since beginning service to Kirtland AFB as a volunteer in 1970, are being selected as Volunteer of the Quarter five times and Volunteer of the Year six times, in 1976, 1980, 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997. She received the Kirtland AFB Angel and Volunteer Excellence awards in 1996 and 1999, respectively.

The slight but hardy former Air Force wife told her coworkers stories of moving to North Carolina in 1929 by horse and wagon. Born at 2 and one-half pounds and fitting into a shoe box, Merritt said, her birth wasn't registered until her mother's doc-



Photo by Jennifer E. West

Frances Merritt makes one of her many baby blankets for Kirtland AFB junior enlisted members.



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Tops in Blue scheduled for Kiva Auditorium

Tops in Blue, the entertainment showcase of the U.S. Air Force, will perform at Albuquerque Convention Center's Kiva Auditorium, Feb. 4, 7 p.m.

The free show is open to the public. Seats for this event are limited to 2,200 and are available on a first-come first-served basis, according to Jane Gates, project officer.

The doors for the show will open approximately 30-45 minutes prior to show time.

Parking for this event will be in the Civic Plaza parking garage on Third Street. The parking fee will be \$5.

The 90-minute performance will take its audience on a musical journey across the country on a train called the Spirit Of America. At each stop along the way, Tops in Blue will celebrate the diverse American music that captures our heritage and represents the pride of our nation.

Sponsors of the event are Kirtland AFB, City of Albuquerque, First Command, AT&T and the Kirtland Federal Credit Union.

Call the Rio Grande Community Center at 853-1861 for more information.



Photo by Staff Sgt. William Greer

Airman 1st Class Keith Loudermill, a personnel specialist from the 377th Mission Support Squadron and a member of Tops in Blue, croons to a member of the 438th Air Expeditionary Group during a performance at a forward-deployed location supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.



Two Airmen STEP up in rank

ABOVE—Master Sgt. Ronald Hall, 58th Operations Support Squadron, receives his new stripes from Col. Michael B. Byers, 58th Special Operations Wing commander (right), and Chief Master Sgt. Bob Benbrooks, wing command chief master sergeant. Hall received his new stripes under the Stripes for Exceptional Performers program Jan. 2. He is a fixed wing aircrew training senior instructor, responsible for training aircrew on special operations.

RIGHT—Tech. Sgt. John Little, 58th Maintenance Operations Squadron, shows the new stripes he received under the Stripes for Exceptional Performers program Jan. 2 from Byers and Benbrooks. Little is the unit education training manager for more than 300 people in the squadron.

Photos by Staff Sgt. Laura L. Holzer

